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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 000529

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TAGS: PGOV EAGR MOPS ER
SUBJECT: ERITREAN TROOPS SENT TO HARVEST GRAIN

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for Reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Rifles Swapped for Sickles

Troops from Eritrea's large standing army have been deployed to grain-producing areas to harvest the country's sparse barley and sorghum crops. Emboffs have witnessed units of uniformed soldiers harvesting barley with small sickles south and west of Asmara. In one field, young conscripts were chanting work songs as they reaped the barley stalks, which have been stunted by inadequate rainfall. While all land in Eritrea is owned by the government, the military has planted large swaths of the relatively productive Asmara plateau in barley, wheat, and sorghum. Most of the grain produced is reportedly used to feed Eritrea's hungry conscript army. Agricultural experts believe Eritrea will produce less than half of its grain needs this year.

¶2. (C) Growing Grumbles

Even Post's local employees, reasonably well off by Eritrean standards, are increasingly worried about food shortages and economic hardship. "There's nothing to buy in the shops, even if you have money, and the government rations last only about ten days out of the month," groused one normally stoic FSN. Post has also heard reports that troops are confiscating grain and firewood transported by farmers or merchants to the capital from outlying areas. "Many people eat only one meal a day," said another Eritrean interlocutor.

President Isaias and other senior officials recently used the state-owned media to characterize the endeavors of the Defense Force and others to achieve food security as "commendable."

¶3. (C) COMMENT: Little Chance of Public QPQotest

The Isaias regime moves swiftly and brutally against all dissidents and rivals, real or imagined. Most Eritreans are unlikely to risk their own and their families' death or imprisonment by public protest. As long as Isaias' security apparatus remains cohesive, long-suffering Eritreans have little recourse but to tighten their belts or flee the country. End Comment.

MCMULLEN